

AIN'T NOTHING LIKE A LITTLE FEAR TO MAKE A PAPER MAN CRUMBLE

Paper Men



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Summary: All Evelyn Tozier wanted to do was make Derry High School a safer place for her kid brother. Well, somewhere between kissing Patrick Hockstetter and telling the principal to go f*** himself, things got a little off track.

1. Chapter 1

1

The Durseys were moving today.

Evelyn Tozier watched from her bedroom window as the young family of four hauled the last of their belongings into their blue station wagon. Little Myra stood beside the car the whole time, clutching a raggedy brown teddy bear against her chest, squeezing so hard its black button eyes looked about to burst from their sockets. One was already loose, Evelyn saw, dangling from a string the color of sand. Evelyn had never gotten around to fixing it. She had meant to—promised to—but then school-life got in the way. Evelyn was a sophomore now, after all, and fully devoted to her studies and extracurriculars. Between student council, honor society, yearbook club, babysitting, and tutoring (which she did after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the public library), the bear had completely slipped her mind; that is, until she saw it this very morning.

It was Evelyn's bear, an old hand-me-down that the teen had dug out of storage one stormy July afternoon while she was babysitting the Dursey kids. They were all excited to go to the park, but the rainstorm kept them trapped inside. It took all of ten minutes before the kids starting going stir-crazy, picking fights with each other and running around the house like a bunch of wild chickens (and chickens would have been easier to catch). Then Myra erupted into a massive temper tantrum because her little sister Gracie stole her favorite doll: a blonde-haired and blue-eyed Barbie, dressed glamorously in a sparkly purple evening gown with heels to match. The bear was only meant to be a temporary distraction, but Myra fell in love with it immediately, and Evelyn didn't have the heart to take it back. Now it seemed to be the only thing that brought the child comfort. The rest of her toys were stuffed in a cardboard box that was already halfway to Connecticut, where Mrs. Dursey's parents lived.

All but one, Evelyn realized, as a chill crept up her back. They never did find that doll, did they?

Mr. Dursey scooped Myra into his arms and carried her into the car. The oldest child was already in the backseat, sitting with his head hung real low. Steven Dursey hadn't spoken much since the incident; neither of the kids had.

Mr. Dursey called out to his wife, his voice booming with a desperate sense of urgency. He didn't need to call her again. The front door closed gustily, and Mrs. Dursey came flying down the stairs. Her face was a pale, hollow mask of its former self, covered in deep wrinkles and untreated blemishes. Before everything happened, Mrs. Dursey would have never been caught dead stepping outside her house without a full face of makeup. (*You should always look your best, Evie darling. You never know who you might run into.*) This morning, the former Miss Derry didn't even bother to shower. She dashed across their once perfectly groomed lawn, completely ignoring the stone path her husband had laid by hand the summer before. Her slippered foot crushed two of her precious daffodils into the dirt. One sprang back up, withered and bent.

(She's strong, my Gracie. That's how I know, Gary. That's how I know she's still alive.)

Mrs. Dursey climbed into the car and slammed the door shut. Not once did she look back at the house they'd owned for ten years. Their pride and joy. It was a beautiful house, the kind of house you bragged about at neighborhood barbecues (the Durseys certainly did, on more than one occasion). In the spring, it looked like something out of a magazine: this perfect two-story colonial, painted white with blue shutters and a blue door, surrounded flowers of all colors and trees so lush they looked artificial. At Christmastime, the Durseys would string up the entire house with these fancy white lights that glistened like stars against the falling snow. They hadn't put up any lights last Christmas, though, not a single one. On November 28th, Mr. Dursey carried in the tree through the front door like he did every year, but the family never decorated it. Evelyn saw it during the memorial service, stuffed away in the corner of the living room, barren and forgotten.

(If you're watching this—whatever you are—please, please, bring my baby home. Please, I'm begging you. She needs to be home with her family beside her Christmas tree.)

Across the street, the car engine suddenly revved with life. The blue station wagon pulled out of the driveway so fast it almost knocked over the Tozier's garbage cans. Then it made a screeching right turn and sped off down the road. The perfect house on 1072 East Summer Street seemed to watch them go, its windows dark and vacant, lonely almost. The sight of it gave Evelyn the shivers.

She closed her curtains and finished getting ready for school.

2

At seven o'clock, the Tozier house was still quiet. Mr. Tozier was at a dental conference in Portland, and Mrs. Tozier, a nurse, wouldn't be home until the kids were already gone, so Evelyn took it upon herself to make sure her little brother got up for school on time.

"Richie," she called, rapping her knuckles on the door. "Richie, time to get up!"

When he didn't respond, she opened the door and peered inside. The room was dark apart from the blue glow of the small TV that he kept on his desk. A large stack of VHS tapes towered to the left of it, leaning dangerously to one side. Evelyn couldn't help but sigh when she saw it. Richie had a habit of falling asleep with the TV on, for the sound more than anything. He just couldn't sleep in a quiet room. Never could, even when he was a baby. The silence always seemed to make him uncomfortable. Maybe that was why he talked so much.

Evelyn flicked the wall switch, filling the room with light. She would have gone inside if there had been a visible path, but her little brother didn't keep his room nearly as tidy as she did. Didn't see the importance of it. All his clothes were lying in a wrinkled heap on the floor, surrounded by comic books, old homework assignments, soda cans, and empty snack bags. Richie knew he wasn't supposed to have food in his room, but the little brat snuck it in anyway. One time, Mrs. Tozier found a plate of leftover pork chops under his bed. Turns out, Richie had forgotten all about it, until the ants showed up.

Evelyn shook her head. "Oh, Mom's gonna freak when she sees this. Richie, get up!"

The lump in the middle of the bed stirred and groaned; then a hand crawled out from under the covers and proudly flipped her the bird.

"Good morning to you, too." Evelyn smiled, unaffected. "Now get up or you'll be late for school." She left the light on as she went downstairs to make breakfast for the two of them.

By the time Richie finally dragged himself out of bed, the scrambled eggs on his plate had already gone cold. He stuffed them into his mouth regardless and then reached for two slices of toast. "So," he asked as he slathered his bread with peanut butter and far too much jelly, "what's got you so quiet?"

Evelyn lifted her head with a sudden jerk. "Huh? Oh, nothing." She went to stab herself another serving of eggs and heard only the quiet screech of metal on tempered glass. Her brother was staring quizzically at her from across the table. She set her fork aside and leaned back in her chair. "The Durseys moved today."

He shrugged. "So? They've been moving for weeks." He wiped some jelly off his chin. "Or did you not notice all the trucks coming and going?"

"You talk to Steve at all?" They were in the same grade, Evelyn remembered. They must have had at least one class together.

"No." His face scrunched up like she'd said something absurd. "Mom made me hang out with him a couple times, but it was too depressing. Whenever things got quiet, he would just start crying, like ugly crying. And we would all just stand there, pretending not to hear. It got too weird."

"Really, Richie?" she said, disappointed.

"What? What was I supposed to say? 'Hey, sorry your sister's dead. Wanna go play some Street Fighter?'"

"I dunno, Richie, maybe have some compassion! Hmm? Or is that too inconvenient for you? I mean, ... I mean, ... how would you feel?" For Evelyn, the thought alone was impossible to bear, so what came out of her brother's mouth next hurt more than she would ever admit.

"Well, right now I'd feel pretty fucking happy." Richie bit down on his lip as soon as the words came out. *Shit*. He hadn't meant that. His sister knew he hadn't meant that, but he apologized anyway, in his head at least. "Can I have some more orange juice?"

Evelyn pushed the pitcher across the table.

"Thanks." He sloshed some juice into his glass and took a long drink to get the bitter taste of regret out of his mouth. But it was still there when he was finished, clinging to his tongue like a thick, grimy, unyielding film. He wiped his wet lips with a napkin. "So what's in the box?"

Evelyn looked to her right. "The new class t-shirts. You wanna see?"

He cracked a smirk. "Not really, but you're gonna show me anyway."

Yeah, he was right about that. Evelyn was already out of her chair and pulling up the cardboard flaps. "I think we really outdid ourselves this time," she said, that naive cheerfulness returning to her voice. "I mean, last year's were pretty sweet [they were bright orange, psychedelic shirts that had the words 'Funky Freshman' on the front], but this design really takes the cake." With great care, she unfolded the shirt and displayed it proudly, like it was a patriotic flag and Richie was supposed to stand at attention and salute. It was sky blue with white lettering, one of the dorkiest shirts Richie had ever seen, with the lamest slogan on the front:

WE PUT THE MORE IN SOPHOMORE!

class of 1991

Richie pushed up his glasses, squinting to make sure he was reading it properly. "What does that even mean?" he asked, dumbfounded.

"What do you mean?" Evelyn looked herself, understanding the play on words right away. "It's ... It's a ... Ugh, just forget it!" Her little brother didn't know what he was talking about. Mr. Burke said her slogan was super clever, so she had no doubt that the rest of the students would like it too.

Or maybe they would hate it.

Maybe they would laugh and throw them in her face like they had with last year's shirts.

Evelyn pushed that thought to the back of her mind as she stuffed the shirt back into the box and closed it. *No, not this year. I did a good job this year. Mr. Burke said so.* She slung her canvas backpack over her shoulder and grabbed the box with both hands. It was heavy, but she could manage it well enough. The bus stop wasn't far, just a little ways down the road at the corner of Palmer Lane and Jackson Street. If she hurried, she would make it on time. She started toward the front door. "Hey, I gotta go catch the bus. Mom left you some lunch money on the counter. Be sure to lock up before you leave, okay? I'll see you tonight." She closed the door with her foot and descended the porch steps.

There was a bright red "FOR SALE" sign sticking out of the Dursey's lawn. Evelyn paused in front of it for a moment, wondering how long it would take before another family moved in.

Not long, she decided grimly. It's a real pretty house.

3

Hannah-Beth Stokes was sitting in her usual seat—in the second to last row, right next to the window—when Evelyn Tozier boarded the bus. Hannah-Beth was a new student at Derry High School, a pastor's daughter who mostly kept to herself. She met Evelyn over the summer while she was roller-skating near Bassey Park. Evelyn had skates of her own and knew all the best routes, so the two became fast friends. Hannah-Beth was glad for that now. The rest of the students hadn't been so welcoming.

"You need help with that box, hun?" the bus driver said to Evelyn. "Dang thing's almost as big as you are." He had a phlegm-rattling laugh that broke into a violent cough. The old man hacked into the crook of his elbow a few times and then opened the window and spat out something nasty.

"You all right, Mr. Healy?" asked Evelyn, peeking out from over the top of the box.

"Right as rain, missy, and don't you think no different." He closed the bus door. "Now, take your seat."

Evelyn quickly and carefully maneuvered her way down the aisle, stepping over school bags and instrument cases. A small considerate few were nice enough to move their stuff out of the way and apologize when they saw her coming, but most simply ignored her as they chatted away with their seat-mates and scrambled to finish late homework assignments.

Hannah-Beth smiled as Evelyn drew near. It was a shy smile, tight and close-lipped to hide the chip in her front tooth. "But don't you worry, sweetie," her mother had assured her, "we'll have that tooth fixed up in no time." Mr. Tozier was a very respected dentist after all, and sure to give his daughter's new friend a generous discount. Her mother was certain of that. "I mean, it would be unkind not to."

But there was nothing unkind about Evelyn Tozier. She was the sort of person who whole-heartedly believed that she could make friends with anybody if she put in enough time and effort. ("A Stranger is Just a Friend You Haven't Met Yet" was one of the many slogans she'd plastered all over the school walls.) For most people it worked, as the girl was rather well-liked by the majority of her classmates and teachers, but for a very small subset of the student body (a strange subset in Hannah-Beth's eyes), the girl was—to put it gently, because to put it any other way would leave her poor friend devastated—a bit of a pill.

Kristie Andrews (who now preferred to be called "Kriss") was of that subset. As Derry's only goth kid, Kriss considered it fashionable to hate everyone, but Evelyn especially rubbed her the wrong way, with her pastel-colored outfits and that annoyingly persistent, can-do attitude. Of course, none of that mattered to Evelyn. Every single day since the first day of their freshman year, she went out of her way to talk to Kriss and sometimes, if she was feeling particularly bold, compliment her. It never went well, Hannah-Beth had been told, but Evelyn kept at it day after day after day.

This morning, she was making another attempt. Hannah-Beth watched nervously, certain it would end in disaster.

"Hey, Kriss," Evelyn said, "your makeup looks nice today."

Kriss, her pale lids painted with a bold cat-eye, didn't even look up as she hissed, "Eat shit, Tozier!"

Hannah-Beth cringed at the interaction, and she couldn't for the life of her understand why Evelyn was smiling as she slid into the seat next to her. Luckily, she didn't have to ask. Evelyn Tozier was an open book.

"Last year," she said, "Kriss would always tell me to fuck off. This year, I'm only eating shit. I dunno about you, but I call that progress." She set the box down at her feet. *Thump*. And she turned toward Hannah-Beth, smiling that perfect smile that went all the way up to her eyes. "So how are you doing?"

Hannah-Beth sat up, suddenly very aware of her posture. "Good. I'm good." Her fingers fumbled with the cover of her paperback novel, bending the upper-right corner upwards.

Evelyn glanced down and saw what she was doing. "New book, huh?" She leaned over to get a better look. There was a man on the cover, bare-chested and muscled like a lonely housewife's fantasy. "What'cha reading?"

"Nuh-Nothing!" Hannah-Beth flipped the book over, hiding the cover from her friend. "Just something for English class." She scooted away, huddling against the window. The bus driver took a left onto Center Street, where small mom-and-pop stores were opening their doors for business. Mr. Keene, the local pharmacist, was crossing over from Court Street, a ring of keys jingling at his side.

"Hey." Evelyn gently bumped Hannah-Beth's shoulder with hers. "You don't have to hide your trashy romance novels from me. I already know you read them during class. Hide them in your textbook so you don't get caught." She chuckled a little to herself. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. Everyone else just thinks you're a super nerd."

Hannah-Beth smiled sheepishly, her cheeks cooling down to a light pink. "My parents won't let me date until I'm thirty." It sounded like a joke, but it wasn't. "This is the only action I'll be getting until then."

Their laughter rang together effortlessly. "Yeah, my parents won't let me date either," Evelyn said. "Not that it matters much. Nobody asks me out anyway." Except for that one time back in the seventh grade, but Evelyn didn't like to think about that. It only made her sad. She sat waiting in Nancy's Cafe until her soda went flat. Only then did she realize that she had been stood up. She spent the rest of the night in her room, crying into her pillow. "Maybe I should borrow one of those books from you."

Evelyn had only meant it as a joke, but Hannah-Beth perked up right away. "You want one? I have plenty."

"Oh?" said Evelyn, taken aback. "Yeah, sure. Maybe."

The bus driver took another left, this time onto Pasture Road. Derry High School was at the end of this road, nestled between Bassey Park and the new athletic complex. Hannah-Beth sat up a little in her seat. She had heard rumors about Bassey Park: that people went there to drink and get high, that students sometimes skipped class and snuck out there to make-out under the trees and do ... other things, the kinds of dirty things Hannah-Beth only read about. Her face flushed at the thought, and her imagination went wild.

Then there was the Kissing Bridge, a covered footbridge where couples carved their initials into the worn-out planks. By the summer's end, Hannah-Beth had read every inch of it: every crooked heart, every cheesy declaration of love. That's how she found the other messages—the lewd ones that made her squirm a little. Those were the ones she re-read over and over, wondering how many were true and how many were made-up. Then, before she would leave, she would always be tempted to write a message of her own, just to prove that she wasn't as innocent as everyone believed. If people saw her name on the Kissing Bridge, they wouldn't call her "Virgin Mary" or "Sister Christian" anymore.

Of course, the fear of getting caught always stopped her in her tracks. Then she would scurry away before anyone saw her. *Next time*, she would always think. *Next time I'll do it for real.*

Sighing, Hannah-Beth stood up with the rest of the students, their morning chatter falling into a depressed silence as they shuffled off

the bus one by one (except for one kid, who was still passed out in his seat). Evelyn alone seemed to be immune to the Monday morning blues. As soon as her feet touched the sidewalk, her eyes came alive with determination, sparkling like small pools of gold in the early morning sun.

The look she gave Hannah-Beth sent shivers down her spine.

"Let's sell some shirts."

2. Chapter 2

1

They had the folding table set up in front of the school's main entrance, right next to the flagpole. Evelyn had always liked that spot. It filled her with a greater sense of pride and purpose, and made everything feel more democratic.

Student council members Paul Colborne and Lenny Arkins were slouched in two of the chairs, looking bored and miserable. Lenny had his neon snapback pulled down over his eyes as he attempted to recover a few precious minutes of the sleep he had surrendered to Evelyn Tozier's latest fundraising campaign. Paul was seriously considering going home sick. He looked around the empty schoolyard, weighing the risk.

"It's way too early for this," he grumbled as he swatted away a buzzing bumblebee. Class didn't start for another forty-five minutes, but Evelyn insisted they show up early to set up everything. *Everything*, he thought, scoffing. It took them less than ten minutes to set up *everything*, and it only took that long because Mr. Marsh couldn't find the keys to the storage room where the folding table and chairs were kept.

"Wait, do you think we did enough?" Paul asked, suddenly worried.

Lenny shrugged. "Probably not." Knowing Evelyn, she was expecting balloons and a giant glitter banner. A single piece of paper taped to a rusty folding table probably wasn't going to cut it. "But it's too late now. I'm all outta notebook paper."

Paul squeezed his head with his hands. "Shit!" Evelyn was going to freak out when she saw their half-assed display and surely blame Paul for everything. *You're the vice president! You're supposed to support me, not sabotage me!* Even in his head, her voice was shrill and accusing. He just couldn't deal with that on a Monday of all days. "Nope," he said, staggering to his feet. "Nope, I'm not doing this. I gotta go, I gotta go. I can't be here. Tell her I'm sick. Tell her I died. I don't care." He ducked under the table and dragged his backpack out

of the grass.

Lenny flicked up his visor. "The bus is here."

"What?" Was it eight o'clock already? Paul came up too fast and slammed his head on the underside of the table. *Thwack!* He sank to his knees, groaning, and stayed there as a parade of shoes went by: sneakers, boots, sandals, loafers. Then he saw their tiny poster slowly float to the ground, a single piece of clear tape flapping in the breeze. *Jeez Louise, Paul, you couldn't even properly tape up a poster.*

A pair of black Mary Janes stopped in front of him. "Hey, guys," he heard Evelyn say pleasantly. "Did you just get here?"

"Nope," Lenny said.

"Oh ..." Her voice sank with disappointment. "Well, where's the poster I asked you to make?"

That was his cue. Paul reached over and snatched the piece of paper off the ground. "It's here, Evelyn." He held it up for her to take.

"Paul, what are you doing down there?" She grabbed the piece of paper, and then there was a moment of silence as she read it over. Paul used that time to get up and settle back into his chair. The new girl, Hannah-Beth, was standing nearby, clutching her pink trapper keeper against her chest. He gave her a quick wave of acknowledgment, and she smiled back.

Evelyn wasn't smiling. She looked mortified. "Guys, I asked you to make a poster. This is a piece of notebook paper with 'Shirts for Sale' scribbled in pen." She flipped the paper over, as if she would find something better hiding on the other side. "What the hell? You had all weekend to work on this."

"I'm sorry," Paul said, "I totally forgot."

Lenny was far less apologetic. "I just didn't care."

Now, Evelyn looked like she was about to cry. "The whole point of the poster was to draw attention to us. From far away, you can't even read this. Hell, up close I can barely read it. And in black pen,

seriously? You couldn't even bother to grab a marker? The school is twenty feet away!"

Paul nodded. "It sounds worse when you put it that way. But, hey, you know what? Four kids sitting at a table is bound to draw plenty of attention all by itself. So do we really need a poster? Do we?"

"Yes, Paul, we need the poster. Now go to the office and grab me some poster paper before I flip this table over."

Paul winced. "But they're fifty cents apiece—"

Evelyn crushed the paper in her fist and roared, "Go, Paul!"

That was all it took. Paul jumped out of his chair and bolted up the school steps two at a time. Lenny watched him go, then leaned back in his chair and yanked his hat back down while the girls got to work.

High above them, the flag billowed and collapsed, billowed and collapsed in the early autumn breeze.

By the time Paul returned with the fifty-cent poster, Evelyn and Hannah-Beth had the shirts perfectly arranged for display. Then Evelyn quickly wrote up a bold, brand new sign with markers from her backpack and securely taped it to the edge of the table. It certainly wasn't her best work, but in a pinch it would do quite nicely.

Evelyn clapped her hands together in satisfaction. "Okay, now we're open for business." And she took her usual seat at the table (center-left, with her vice president to her right) and waited patiently for the first student to approach.

And she waited.

And she waited.

And she straightened each pile of shirts, one by one.

And then she waited some more.

"Come on, guys!" Evelyn shouted. "Support your sophomore student council!"

A group of students stopped. "We have a sophomore student council?" one girl asked.

"Yes. Us." Evelyn made a wide gesture with her hands. "We're the sophomore student council."

The girl made a face like she didn't understand. "Well, I don't remember voting for you." And then they walked away.

Evelyn fell against her backrest, dejected. In their first ten minutes of business, they hadn't sold a single shirt. Some kids looked them over, and some even complimented them, but as soon as they found out they weren't free, they dropped them and moved on.

"Maybe we should just start giving them away," Paul suggested, anxious to pack up and call it a day before the first warning bell rang.

"That totally defeats the purpose of a fundraiser."

"Well, nobody wants to buy t-shirts. We should have just organized a dance like everyone else. Dances always sell. Teenagers can't get enough of 'em."

"The senior class sold out of all their t-shirts in a day. People love t-shirts."

"No, seniors love t-shirts. Why? Because of the nostalgia factor. They're graduating at the end of the year. We're not."

Hannah-Beth looked over at them timidly. "I like the shirts. They're cute."

Evelyn smiled. "Thank you, Hannah." She nudged her vice president with her elbow. "See that, Paul? Positivity, that's what we need. Now let's finish strong."

The next wave of students was coming: on foot, on bikes, or in their

parents' cars. Evelyn saw one of the new kids, a chubby eighth-grader called Ben something-or-other, peddling toward the west entrance with a pair of headphones hanging around his neck. Elizabeth Mueller was there too, along with her little sister Shelly. They climbed out of her white 1986 Honda Accord and crossed the street together, carrying their books in their arms instead of in schoolbags because, apparently, that was the cool thing to do now.

Paul's jaw dropped when he saw Elizabeth Mueller. "Is she allowed to wear a skirt that short? I'm pretty sure that goes against the dress code."

"Who cares?" Lenny said, now awake and alert. Leaning forward, the two boys followed her with their eyes as she slowly walked across the lawn in her pleated mini skirt and baggy varsity sweater. For a second, the wind caught her blonde hair perfectly, sending it blowing gently across her face. "Is it just me, or do her legs get longer and longer every year?"

Evelyn shot him a disgusted look. "It's just you."

"Shit, guys, she's coming this way!"

"Be cool! Be cool!"

Elizabeth and Shelly stopped in front of the table. "Oh my god, how cute are these?" Elizabeth squealed, grabbing a shirt off the pile. She held it up against her chest, beaming like she'd just found the biggest steal of the century. "Shelly, look at this. Isn't it adorable?"

Shelly gave a disinterested shrug.

"God, I wish we had something like this when I was a sophomore. I would have worn it, like, every day. I'm not even kidding." She turned around to face the four student council members. The boys were a pair of blushing, babbling fools, but Elizabeth paid little attention to them. Her eyes went straight to Evelyn. "You're ... Evelyn, right? You designed these?"

Evelyn jumped a little. "Yuh-Yes!" she said, surprised that a senior girl actually knew her name. "I was inspired by the senior class shirts,

actually. They're just so cool."

Elizabeth laughed. "Well, I think yours is a bit more clever. I mean, how much creativity does it really take to throw 'Seniors: We're Number One!' on a t-shirt?" She rolled her eyes. "Pretty sure Jackie just ripped off last year's design anyway. So give yourself more credit." Then she reached into her black satchel handbag and pulled out a small pink wallet. "So how much?"

Evelyn's eyes widened. "You ... want to buy one?"

"Sure do! How much?"

"Three dollars ...?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Sounds fair to me." And she pulled out the money and handed it over. The bills were perfectly crisp and smelled just like her floral perfume.

"Oh, wait," Evelyn said, "you accidentally gave us a ten." It must have been wedged between two of the ones. She tried to give it back, but Elizabeth refused it for some reason.

"Consider it a donation from one former president to another." Smiling, Elizabeth closed her wallet and tossed it back into her purse. "I was in student council my freshman year. *Just* my freshman year. It was practically torture."

Shelly gave a frustrated huff. "This is practically torture. Can we go now?"

Elizabeth waved her off. "Yeah, yeah, we'll go. Anyway, thanks for the shirt. Good luck selling the rest." She threw the group of them a playful wink and then strolled off with her new shirt draped over her arm.

Paul's jaw was practically touching the table. "My god ..."

"She's an angel," Lenny finished for him.

"An angel sent down from the senior class."

Evelyn wasn't listening to them. She was too busy fingering through the small stack of bills. *One, two, three—thirteen dollars!* A strange feeling of validation came over her, one that made her feel warm and fuzzy all over. *I knew it! I knew these shirts were cool. I mean, if Elizabeth Mueller likes them, they have to be cool, right? She's the coolest girl in school.* She wanted to take this wad of cash and shove it in her brother's face. *Ha! Take that, Richie!*

Instead, she passed the money over to Lenny, and he sealed it away in the red pouch.

3

It was 8:20 now according to Paul's wristwatch, and they had sold one shirt. Only one. But from the smile on Evelyn's face, you would have thought they'd sold twenty.

Her little brother was making his way to school around this time, along with his best friends Eddie Kaspbrak, Stan Uris, and Bill Denbrough. Evelyn liked his friends well enough. They all mostly kept to themselves, hanging out at the arcade or in the Barrens, doing weird boy things like spitting and jumping off stuff. Most importantly they kept Richie occupied, which meant he had less time to pester her and her friends.

Except for today, that is. After all, how could Richie resist embarrassing his sister and rubbing her failure in her face? That's what little brothers are for.

Suddenly, the four boys had crowded around her table, putting their hands all over her shirts and messing up her neatly folded piles.

"Wow, look at this display!" Richie said with a cheeky grin. "So many shirts! Stan, look at all these shirts!"

Stan was too busy glaring at the one in his hands. "The text isn't centered."

"What?" Evelyn said. Leave it to Stan to focus on the smallest, most insignificant detail. "I'm sure it's fine, Stan." She looked at her brother. "Hey, Richie, don't you have better things to do?"

"I have a million better things to do."

"Then pick one and go do it."

To the left of her, Eddie was searching around for a label. "Are these 100% cotton?"

"I honestly don't know, Eddie—Stan, please stop staring at the shirt. We get it, it's not perfectly centered, but it's too late to change it now, okay? Please, just put it down—Richie, would you quit doing that? Stop, you're gonna stretch it out! "

Bill was folding his back up, trying to put it just as it was before. "I think they're nuh-nuh-nuh-nice, Ev-Evelyn."

Evelyn smiled at him. "Thank you, Bill."

"Polyester makes me break out in hives," said Eddie.

That made Richie smirk. "Pretty sure you just have syphilis."

"Oh, yeah, Richie? Well, then I must have gotten it from your sist—" Eddie stopped, choking his words. "—err, never mind." He dropped the shirt on the table and took a quick suck from his inhaler before stepping back.

Richie pretended to be offended. "Are you saying my sister has syphilis?"

Evelyn wanted to sink under the table and disappear. "Please, stop saying syphilis. People are starting to stare."

"What? I'm defending your honor. Do you want the whole school thinking you have syphilis?"

"Oh my god, Richie, would you stop saying that word?" She threw her hands over her head and let out a frustrated moan. What was it going to take to get them to leave?

A blue Trans Am pulling up to the school, that's what. As soon as the boys caught sight of it, they scattered like fish evading a hungry shark. "See ya, sis!" Richie shouted over his shoulder, leaving her to

fend for herself against Derry's biggest bullies.

"Bowers," Paul said, groaning. "Of all the days for him to actually go to class." He leaned over and began gathering his things. "Well, I think it's time to call it a day, folks."

For once, Evelyn agreed with him. She looked over at her treasurer. "Lenny, take the money and go." Henry Bowers wasn't about to stuff his pockets with all their hard-earned money, not this year.

The car door opened, and Belch Huggins stepped out of the driver's side.

"Lenny, go now!"

Coins jingled as Lenny Arkins tossed the red money bag into his backpack. "Later, guys."

All three of them were out of the car now: Henry Bowers in the middle with his hands buried in the pockets of his distressed denim jacket, while his grunts, Belch Huggins and Vic Criss, followed on either side of him. They crossed the street without looking, as if that somehow made them seem more intimidating, and when a concerned parent criticized them for it, Vic Criss silently gave her the finger while Belch laughed.

Evelyn was trying to pack up all the shirts as quickly as possible. Hannah-Beth and Paul were helping, but even with three people, they weren't going fast enough.

Please don't come over, she silently begged. Please don't come over. Just keep walking.

They had just gotten to the last pile when she heard Henry Bowers's voice behind her: "Why the hurry, Tozier?"

Shit.

His shoulder brushed against hers as he circled around, knocking her off balance a little.

Evelyn kept her head down, refusing to look at him. "Class is gonna

start soon. I don't wanna be late." She reached for the last stack of shirts, but one of the boys snatched it away.

"Well, what do we have here?" said Belch, a vicious grin plastered on his face. He ripped the top shirt free and threw the rest to Vic. Evelyn's eyes followed, widening in horror as her precious shirts got all wrinkled in the teen's hands. "What's that say, Vic? 'We Put the More in Sophomore.' Awwwww ... hahaha."

"Oh, that's real cute, Tozier."

"Adorable."

For a second, Evelyn thought of Elizabeth Mueller and her thirteen dollars. She'd called her shirts adorable too, and Evelyn thought that was the best compliment she'd ever received. Funny, that word sounded so disgusting coming from these boys now. Almost dirty.

The two boys continued to laugh and mock her while Henry Bowers watched, smirking. "Why were you trying to hide these?" he asked, slowly coming closer, so close that Evelyn could smell the faint cigarette smoke on his jacket. "Huh? We're sophomores too, aren't we? Or don't we count?"

"You want one?" Evelyn said in an almost taunting sort of way. "They're three dollars."

Paul shot her a panicked look. "What the hell are you doing?" he whispered.

Evelyn didn't know, but it was too late to go back now.

"Three dollars?" Henry's face twisted into a crooked smile, blue eyes coming alive; then he turned to Belch. "Hold out that shirt."

Belch did as he commanded, and Evelyn watched, confused, as Henry walked over to him. "Three dollars, she says." He pulled out something small from his pocket. It shimmered a little when the sunlight caught it just right, like a skinny bar of pure silver. He held it up against her shirt and looked right at her. "Well, how about now?"

When his finger flicked the switch on the side, it turned into something ugly and dangerous. It bit into the blue fabric, tearing with its steel teeth, ripping, shredding, destroying the shirt Evelyn had spent weeks designing, making sure every detail was perfect. *And it was perfect. Mr. Burke said so. Elizabeth Mueller said so. I did a good job this year.*

Now her perfect shirt was in pieces, hanging lifelessly in the air. Evelyn felt her fist clench in anger. "Three dollars," she muttered so quietly no one could hear her.

"What was that, Tozier?" Henry asked, stepping toward her, the knife still clutched at his side.

"Three dollars," she said louder, eying the knife carefully. He wouldn't use it, not at school. He wasn't that dumb.

"What?"

"Three dollars, Henry!" she yelled. "You ruined the shirt. I can't sell it now. So you owe me three dollars." She thrust out her hand. "Now pay up."

Her stubborn resistance earned more laughter from Vic and Belch. Henry shot them a weird look, as if he thought for just a moment that they were laughing at *him*. Then he got downright furious. His nostrils flared up, and his jaw got real tight. Evelyn backed away. She knew that face well. It was the face he always had when things were about to get real, real bad. She'd seen it directed at her once before, back when they were just little kids on the playground, right before he pushed her to the ground and spit on her.

"Mind your own fuckin' business!"

Evelyn closed her eyes, remembering for half a moment, and then she felt something land on her hand. It was warm and wet. Evelyn opened her eyes and saw the glob of spit pooling in her open palm. Almost instantly, she was back on that playground, lying on her back, confused and terrified of the screaming boy with the yellow bandaid on his cheek. *I guess some things never change.* Evelyn nearly laughed at the absurdity of it.

But then she heard Hannah-Beth gasp.

"Hey!" she cried, stumbling forward and reaching out with empty hands. "Hey, give that back!"

Belch had taken the box from her—all sixty shirts—and he was walking away with it.

Wait. No. Stop.

"Oh, come on, guys!" Paul shouted. "Come on, give them back! They're just stupid shirts. Nobody wants them, trust me! Hell, we can't even sell them!"

I can sell them. I sold one. Elizabeth Mueller thought they were cute.

Evelyn watched in stunned silence as Henry Bowers backed away from her, smirking. "See you around, Tozier. And don't worry about your shirts. We'll take care of 'em for you."

"Oh yeah, we'll take real good care of 'em," said Vic.

They disappeared around the corner, their cruel laughter mixing together with the brassy ring of the first warning bell. The schoolyard was quiet now apart from the grunts of a few straggling students. So quiet that Hannah-Beth could hear Evelyn's whisper-quiet puffs of panicked breath.

"Did you see that?" Paul said to Hannah-Beth. "Dude had a knife. Who the fuck gave that kid a knife?"

3. Chapter 3

1

"Don't worry, Evie," Paul had said before they parted ways, "we'll get your shirts back, I promise." He put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Just try to stay positive, all right? It'll all work out. Anyways, I gotta go. I'll see you in third period, okay?" He threw her a wave and headed off to his homeroom class.

Evelyn watched him go. All around her, students came and went in a hurry, but Evelyn didn't move at all. *It'll all work out. He says that, but he doesn't believe it either.*

Sighing, Evelyn sank into her chair just as the final warning bell sounded. A few more students came pouring in after her, their worried expressions fading once they realized no teacher was waiting to count them tardy. Scott Kellerman seemed especially grateful. "Whoa, no detention for me today," he said with a laugh. "Righteous." Then he kicked his skateboard into his hand and made his way to his seat in the back of the room.

"Dude." He stopped abruptly in front of Evelyn's desk in the second row, dragging his knuckles along the shiny woodgrain surface. "My condolences."

Evelyn looked up at him, confused. "Huh? Did someone die?"

"No, I heard Henry Bowers jacked your shirts. Tough break, Tozier."

"Oh ... Yeah, it sucks."

He nodded. "Totally. I heard they were pretty sweet, too. You know, if you ever get them back, I'd love to buy a couple." He tugged on his yellow hot dog shirt. "I'm always in the market for new shirts."

"Right. Thanks, Skelly." She felt a little weird calling him by that nickname (which came out of nowhere one day and just kind of stuck), but it always seemed to make him smile when he heard it.

Skelly continued down the aisle with his usual bouncy, energetic gait,

earning amused glances and quiet giggles from the students around him, and right before sitting down, he gave Denny Booker a high-five that sounded like it hurt. "Happy Monday, everybody!"

April Nilsen and Stephanie Price were the last to casually stroll into the classroom. They liked to take their sweet time in the bathroom, touching up their makeup and poofing out their hair with enough hairspray to single-handedly destroy the ozone layer.

"Late," Skelly said, shaming them with his finger. "You're both late. Go get your tardy passes."

April rolled her eyes. "Eat me, Skelly."

The girls took their seats on either side of Evelyn, who was silently waiting for class to start. Most days, the two never said a word to her. In fact, their only interaction came when one of them would whisper, "Can you move your head?" so they could continue their conversation. During the first week of school, Evelyn had offered to switch seats, but Mrs. Sitz said the seating arrangement was set in stone. "You girls are together all day. Surely forty-five minutes apart won't kill you."

No, it hadn't killed them yet, but it was quite frustrating having to listen to them gossip and gab all period. Eventually, Evelyn learned to tune them out. In fact, she was tuning them out right now.

"Hey!" Steph whispered. "Hey, you!" She nudged Evelyn on the arm to get her attention. Once she had it, the girl put on a smug smile, like she was doing Evelyn some great honor by talking to her. "So we heard about what happened this morning. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks." Evelyn glanced over her shoulder and saw April listening intently, her chin propped neatly upon her hand. Her fingernails were painted a glossy aqua to match the scrunchie in her hair.

Steph called her back with a snap of her fingers. "Well," she went on, "we sure hope you washed your hands after."

Evelyn wondered what exactly she was implying.

April Nilsen was less subtle. "It'd probably be safer to cut it off." She made a slicing motion with her hand, lopping off her wrist with an imaginary blade. "God knows what you'll catch from that kid."

Henry Bowers, he was "that kid."

"Seriously, he's always so dirty. Like, do you own any clean clothes?"

"He lives on a farm," Evelyn said, cutting them off. "Most of the time he's stuck doing chores before school."

Steph Price scrunched up her face in an ugly way. "So ...?"

"So that's why his clothes are a little dirty," Evelyn said, getting visibly annoyed. "Yours would be too—you know, if you ever had to do actual physical labor."

Steph hadn't liked that; Evelyn could see it written all over her face as she pulled away, her bright pink lips fixed in a nasty sneer. "You know, I heard they tossed those ugly shirts in the dumpster behind the school." Her right eyebrow arched in disdain. April Nilsen was snickering like a horse. "I hope they did, because that's exactly where they belong."

The girls turned back around just as Mrs. Sitz entered the classroom. "Sorry I'm late, class," she said, dropping an armful of ungraded papers onto her desk. "Faculty meeting ran a little late."

Skelly raised his hand. "Do you have a tardy pass, Mrs. Sitz?"

The whole class laughed.

"Very funny, Mr. Kellerman," Mrs. Sitz replied, fighting a smile. She adjusted her glasses so they sat more comfortably on her pudgy nose. "All right, if there are no more jokes, how about we go ahead and get started, hmm?" She grabbed the clipboard off the desk. "Evelyn, would you like to take attendance?"

"Sure." Evelyn went to the front of the room and took the attendance chart from the teacher. "Okay, umm, Denny Booker?"

He raised his hand only half the way. "Here."

Evelyn put a checkmark next to his name. "Micky Coughlan?"

"Here!"

"Colin Creswell?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Anna Elworthy?"

"Here."

Name by name, Evelyn worked her way down the list, making all the necessary marks. It was tedious work, requiring very little thought or effort. By now, Evelyn practically knew the class roster by heart; she could tell who was present and who was absent from a single glance around the classroom. Lately, there was always one empty desk: the one all the way back in the far left corner. It had been empty for the last three weeks and would remain empty for another two. The student had been suspended at the beginning of the school year for starting a fire in the library. The reason? Boredom, apparently. Evelyn didn't even have to say the name aloud anymore (no other student ever did), but for some reason, she always paused for a second when saw his name on the attendance sheet.

Hilary Garnham ✓

Christie Gibson ✓

Jeannette Gough ✓

Ashton Griphin ✕

Jared Hellyer ✓

Patrick Hockstetter

She whispered the name to herself and made two tiny slashes with her pen; then it was on to the next name.

"Okay, so for lunch today, the school is serving beef stroganoff with boiled carrots. Students are once again reminded not to throw their

utensils in the trash bins. Please be considerate when disposing of your trays. All FBLA members are to report to Room 203 during lunch for a mandatory meeting. If you absolutely cannot attend, please speak to Mr. Larsen prior to the meeting. Lastly, um, the yearbook club—"

A soft click filled the quiet room. The whole class seemed to look up in unison as the door swung open and Patrick Hockstetter entered the classroom.

2

"Holy shit," someone whispered.

"I thought he wasn't allowed back for another two weeks."

"Guess not."

Patrick drank in their comments with an amused smile. Everything was a joke to him. Life was a game that only he knew the rules to, and most people didn't even realize they were playing it.

After twelve years, the students and teachers of Derry had stopped trying to figure out Patrick Hockstetter; they merely accepted that he was ... undefinable. His former art teacher had once compared him to a large lump of brown clay, able to be mushed and molded into many pleasing and desirable shapes but lacking any real form of its own.

In his younger years, the boy was described by his teachers as a quiet and apathetic child. The school held him back a year due to poor attendance, but he was by all other accounts a "straight kid," easily lost in the shuffle with students like Henry Bowers acting out violently and stealing all the attention. He was so forgettable, in fact, that Evelyn didn't even realize they had been schoolmates until she stumbled across some old photos of him in the elementary school hallway. He looked the same in every single one: small, a little pudgy, with black hair and a cold, empty stare that seemed to follow Evelyn as she walked past.

Maybe, she thought, all those rumors about him were true.

In the second grade, Sasha Gunt caused a huge ruckus when she

suddenly jumped out of her chair during science class, screaming at the top of her lungs. Her seat-mate had shown her something in his pencil case, and it left her trembling and terrified. The teacher forced Patrick to hand over the case, and he was shocked to find it filled with hundreds of dead flies. He brought this to the school counselor, who dismissed it right away as a coping mechanism: strange but ultimately harmless. They had gone easy on him that year because his baby brother had recently died in a tragic case of crib death. "It's only natural for him to be a little curious about death."

His curiosity only grew as he got older. A bunch of neighborhood pets went missing over the summer of '86. He was never able to prove it, but Denny Booker once claimed he saw Patrick walking around with a large black trash bag—and something inside it was *moving*. He ran home and told his parents, but they said he was probably just seeing things. A month later, all the pets stopped disappearing, and everything went back to normal, but Denny Booker never looked at Patrick the same way again. Even now he seemed visibly uncomfortable and would later ask to be excused from class. Said he was coming down with the flu or something. He practically ran to the nurse's office after Mrs. Sitz gave him his hall pass.

When school started up again in the fall, Patrick just kind of vanished. His parents pulled him out of school mysteriously and kept him out for the whole year. Nobody knew why, and, frankly, everyone was a little scared to ask. When he finally came back, he was in Evelyn's freshman class and hanging out with Henry Bowers and his group. It was weird, but then again, everything about Patrick Hockstetter was a little weird.

So nobody was shocked when they heard Patrick had set fire to the library. If anything, they were surprised the crazy bastard hadn't burned down the whole school.

They just never expected him back this early.

Evelyn felt the clipboard slip out of her hands. Heard it clatter to the floor. But when she bent down to pick it up, she saw a second hand reaching for it. Evelyn knew instantly whose it was. It was large and pale, with long, skinny fingers and dried out cuticles that were cracked and looked picked at. (He did pick at them occasionally,

Evelyn remembered, when he was bored.) Wrapped loosely around his wrist was an assortment of knotted leather bands and thick metal chains that made a rattling sound when they brushed against the floor. They jangled together quietly as he slowly lifted the clipboard.

Evelyn lifted her gaze, too, and saw a pair of playful blue eyes staring back at her. "Here ya go," Patrick said, the shadow of a smile on his lips.

Evelyn's breath hitched in her throat. "Thanks."

She took the clipboard and quickly climbed to her feet. Patrick was on his feet too, casually walking toward his desk. He stopped when he heard his name being called and did a half-turn.

Mrs. Sitz was up from her chair. "Do you have a late pass, Mr. Hockstetter?"

He reached into his jean pockets and turned them inside out. "No," he said, grinning from ear to ear, "I don't." Then he plopped into his desk and got comfortable, stretching out his long, long legs. The boy next to him scooted away a little.

"And I trust you don't have any contraband on you today?"

"Nope. You wanna give me a pat-down?" The vice-principal already had when he came into school. Mrs. Sitz was sure to have a much gentler touch.

Mrs. Sitz's expression was anything but gentle. "That won't be necessary, but perhaps you'd like to apologize to Miss Tozier for so rudely interrupting this morning's announcements."

"Sure," he said uncaringly. "Sorry, sweetheart."

If he was looking at her, Evelyn didn't know it. She kept her eyes glued to the floor, wanting nothing more than to return to her seat.

She felt Mrs. Sitz's hand on her shoulder. "Please continue, Evelyn."

She nodded. "Umm ... The, uh, the yearbook club is looking for new members, so if anyone's interested, please come to one of our

meetings. We hold them every other Wednesday after school in Room 113."

"Thank you, Evelyn."

She dropped the chart off and went back to her desk.

The rest of the period was an open study hall, where students were free to read, finish homework, or quietly visit with the other students. Mrs. Sitz sat her desk the whole time, head bent over a stack of papers while her right hand scribbled away with a red pen. Every once in a while she would look up to make sure nobody was misbehaving.

"Mr. Weller, Miss Gibson, I hope you're not doing what I think you're doing."

Christie Gibson slammed her notebook shut and Nathan Weller pretended to be looking elsewhere.

"Mhm." Mrs. Sitz shook her head and went back to her grading.

Evelyn was getting a jump on this week's reading for her fifth-period biology class. She liked to read ahead and jot down any notes or questions that came to her mind. That way, she could go into class fully prepared to participate in the discussion. The other students didn't like it much, especially when it was always her hand going up during the lecture, but Evelyn didn't really care. She wanted to get the most out of her education.

But it was so hard to focus when she could feel eyes burning into the back of her head. She looked over her shoulder once and instantly regretted it because there was Patrick Hockstetter, sitting without a single book on his desk, doing absolutely nothing except staring at her.

Evelyn whipped back around and buried her head in her textbook.

The end of the period came as a huge relief to Evelyn. As soon as the clock struck 9:15, she gathered her things and rushed to the door,

hoping to make it out before everyone else. But she wasn't fast enough, not by a long shot. The mob was already ahead of her, jamming up the only exit.

She felt Patrick behind her the whole time, but he didn't say anything, not until they were in the hallway. That's when he suddenly came up beside her, walking so close his arm kept brushing against her shoulder.

"Hey," he said, "I've seen you before. Where have I seen you?"

She put some distance between them. "Uhh, school? We've been going to the same school for years, Patrick."

He shook his head. "No, that's not it."

"Then I dunno. Sorry." Evelyn picked up her pace, trying to lose him. For a moment, she actually thought she had. She went to her locker and started fiddling around with the combination lock when she heard a loud slam beside her. Patrick had thrown himself into the lockers.

"I remember now!" he said. "You were in that bullying video they showed us in gym class last year."

"Oh. Yeah, I was." All the student council members had played a part in producing it, but Evelyn's role in the video had been insignificant, reduced to a mere five seconds of screentime. How could anybody remember that? She assumed he was just messing with her.

Patrick moved out of the way when Evelyn swung open her locker door. "Yeah, I liked that video," he went on with a crooked grin. "Gave me a good laugh."

"Yeah, it gave everyone a good laugh," Evelyn muttered ruefully. *And somehow it made our school's bullying problem even worse.* She snatched her algebra book and closed her locker. Patrick didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave, but she certainly was. "Look, Patrick, I gotta head to class. It's, uhh, nice to have you back." She didn't know what else to say, and he didn't seem to care if she meant it or not.

He shrugged away from her. "Sure. I guess I'll see you around then."

Leaning against her locker, Evelyn watched him strut down the hallway with a long, awkward stride. *What was all that about?* she wondered, her chest tightening with worry. Patrick never talked to her before. Never so much as looked at her. So why was he seeking her out all of a sudden?

Maybe I'm overthinking it.

Yeah, she probably was. Nothing Patrick did ever made much sense anyway.

4. Chapter 4

1

Victor Criss was always the first to arrive at Mr. Grumley's advanced algebra class. He had to come early or else he might risk running into Henry Bowers or Belch Huggins in the hallway during the period change. They both thought he was in the regular math class (the dumb kid's math, according to his mother) because that's what Vic had told them, and if they found out he'd lied, they were sure to give him a whole lotta hell.

It would have been so much easier if Ms. Putnam had just let him flunk out last year. Then they would have sent him down to the dumb kid's math, and he wouldn't have to go through all this trouble. But then his mother got involved, like she always did, and Ms. Putnam agreed to give Vic a passing grade as long as he attended summer school. And you bet Mrs. Criss drove her son to his summer school classes every single day, and she watched to make sure he actually went into the building.

Vic pulled out his notebook and checked over all his answers one more time. That's when Evelyn Tozier walked into the classroom, carrying her math book at her side. Their eyes met in a brief but awkward stare before Vic returned to his homework and Evelyn made her way down the aisle, gusting past. His chewed up pencil went *tap, tap, tap* against the wood.

Suddenly, a backpack thudded to the floor behind him; then came the *thump, dump, plop* of her textbook, notebook, and fabric pencil case hitting the desk. Vic flipped to the next page, paper rustling as it settled. Her chair made a quiet *squeak, squeak-squeak, squeak*.

The painful **WHACK!** came last, striking Vic right in the back of the head.

"Fuck!" Vic cursed, flinching away from her. "Jeez, what gives, Ev?"

Evelyn leaned forward, shifting her weight onto her forearms. "That was a real shitty thing you guys did," she said with fire in her voice.

"You knew how much those shirts meant to me, Victor, and you guys went and threw them in the garbage? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What? What are you talking about?" He whipped around, then recoiled when he saw her hand fly up again. But this time it didn't make contact. It just hovered there, threatening to come down at any second if she didn't like his answer. Vic groaned, feeling more irritated than intimidated. "Look, we didn't throw your shirts in the garbage, okay? Last I saw they were in the backseat of Belch's car. If they got tossed, I don't know anything about it."

"Oh." Evelyn's chest deflated and her shoulders sank, hand falling to her side. *I guess Steph was lying then. Should've figured as much.* Then she crossed her arms over her chest and gave a frustrated huff. "Well, it was still messed up what you guys did. I need those shirts back, Vic. I really, really need them."

"So?" he said, the aggravation straining his voice. "What do you expect me to do about it? That's Henry's call, not mine." Then he gave his back to her, as if to say, *You're shit outta luck, kid.*

His answer didn't surprise her. Victor Criss was never one to stick out his neck too far for anyone else, not even when they were kids (back when he was still a brunet and didn't dress like some wannabe punk). In the third grade, he watched his best friend Jimmy Duncan take a brutal pounding and didn't lift a finger. When Sarah Miller's brand new leather jacket was stolen from her locker, he claimed he hadn't seen a thing even though he was there when Martin Davers swiped it.

"It's all about survival," he would always tell Evelyn, like school was some big war-zone you had to carefully navigate. And maybe it was. Maybe it was easier to lay low and stay out of the line of fire.

But why did that have to mean joining up with bullies like Henry Bowers? Evelyn had never understood that part.

"By the way," Evelyn said slowly, hesitant to bring it up at all, "where did Henry get that knife?"

Vic shrugged. "His old man gave it to him, I guess. Relax, it's just for

show. Not like he's ever gonna use it on anyone."

Yeah, until he does, Evelyn thought woefully, remembering the manic rage that blazed in his eyes as he sliced and hacked at her shirt. It wasn't normal, not even for him, and it scared her a little. She rubbed her temple, feeling a headache coming on from thinking about it so much.

You shouldn't trouble yourself over it, Evie, her mother would say. *He's not your burden.*

Yeah, she would shoot back, *but sometimes it sure feels like he is.*

Evelyn started to trace the woodgrain pattern on her desk with her finger. "Hey, Vic," she said quietly, "how's he been?"

"Same as always." He shot her a sideways glance. "Why, haven't you seen him lately?"

Evelyn shook her head. "No, not since—"

Rebecca Hall came into the classroom, followed by Andrew Davies and Seth McFadden. *Great timing, guys*. Reluctantly, Evelyn pulled away from Vic and opened her notebook, pretending to review her work. Seth McFadden sat down across from her and asked to check some of his answers against hers. Naturally, Evelyn kindly obliged, and Seth pushed their desks together. For the next couple of minutes, Vic listened to them swap answers, snickering to himself the whole time. His lips curled over his braces as he held in a smile.

That dumbass didn't have one correct answer.

Once class started, Victor Criss and Evelyn Tozier retreated into their usual routines. Evelyn was fully engaged in Mr. Grumley's lecture, asking questions and going up to the chalkboard to solve his sample equations. Vic didn't raise his hand once, but he answered all the questions in his head and smirked whenever he heard a wrong answer. He almost laughed out loud when Rebecca Hall said eight was a prime number.

Then, about halfway through the class, he heard something land on his desk. He looked down and saw a piece of paper, neatly folded

into a perfect little package. He unfolded it and read the note.

Vic, I need those shirts back. Please.

Sighing, Vic grabbed his pencil and wrote up a quick answer before tossing the note back over his shoulder.

Fine, I'll talk to Henry.

No promises.

Evelyn hid her smile behind her hand and crumpled the paper into a tiny ball. Then she ripped off another piece and wrote something else.

Did you guys send Patrick to mess with me or something?

Vic's response was fast, landing on Evelyn's desk with a quiet tap.

Didn't even know he was back.

Why?

Evelyn grabbed her pencil but then immediately dropped it. *You're acting ridiculous now, Evelyn. Why would Henry send Patrick after you in the first place? That's not something he would do. You're just being paranoid. And Patrick is just being ... Patrick. This is what he does. He plays around with the first thing that catches his eye and then quickly moves on to the next shiny toy. In fact, he's probably already moved on. Just relax. Focus on getting your shirts back.* She set the paper aside and turned her attention back to Mr. Grumley's rambling lecture.

When the bell rang, Vic was the first one up from his chair, slinking out into the hallway before the crowd got too big, before Evelyn had even started to pack up. She later caught sight of his green military jacket as she made her way to her next class. He was heading toward the east exit, where he would join up with his so-called friends and spend third period slouching around Bassey Park.

Evelyn shook her head in disapproval. "You're better than that!" she shouted at his back.

Vic didn't miss a stride, but before pushing open the door, he turned and gave her this defeated look, as if to say, *Sorry, but I'm not.*

At lunchtime, Evelyn found her friends at their usual table in the cafeteria. Hannah-Beth was very carefully unloading the lunch her mother had packed for her: a grilled cheese sandwich cut into two neat triangles, a small thermos of tomato soup, a plastic bag of carrot sticks, and a shiny red apple, which she tossed to Lenny Arkins when he asked for it.

"Do you want a carrot?" she asked Evelyn as she sat down.

Evelyn shook her head. "No, thank you."

Paul was picking through the pile of grey mush on his tray. "So, Evelyn, I did some digging around. People are saying Bowers threw your shirts in the dumpster. If you want, we can go looking for them after school." He smirked. "We'll just toss one of the seventh graders in there. Let them do all the dirty work."

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Very funny."

Paul took a swig of his milk and wiped his lips dry with the back of his hand. "Seriously, though, we can go look. And I'm sure if you ask Mr. Marsh nicely, he'll even get them for us."

Evelyn stabbed herself a forkful of pasta. "Yeah, maybe."

Paul's brow furrowed. "What's eating you? I thought you'd be happy."

"No, I am happy. I just ..." She ran her fingers through her hair and let out a tired sigh. "Sorry, I just have a lot on my mind right now."

Paul shrugged it off and went back to his food. "You know, I still can't believe Bowers pulled out a knife this morning. How fucked up is that?"

Hannah-Beth was still trying to forget about that. It gave her goosebumps all over. "Has he always been so ...?"

"Crazy? Yeah, pretty much. I mean, I've only had to endure him for a couple years." Paul Colborne had moved to Derry in the middle of the seventh grade, and Henry Bowers welcomed him to town by shoving

his face in the toilet and holding him there until he almost drowned. "But our little Evie here has been dealing with him for much, much longer. Isn't that right?"

"Huh?" Hannah-Beth switched her gaze to Evelyn, who seemed oddly preoccupied with her food, playing with it but eating hardly a bite. It wasn't like her to be this quiet. "So what was he like, Evelyn?"

When she looked up, her expression was cool and withdrawn. "Not much different than he is now," she said. *Short-tempered and easily provoked into violence.* Back then, he was just the farm kid who always came to school dirty and covered with all kinds of cuts, scrapes, and bruises. The teachers never thought much of it. Never so much as batted an eye. They just assumed it was from all the fighting he did.

Because it's easier to accept the simple answer than to ask the tough questions. That's what her mother had told her.

Evelyn peered over her shoulder and found his group sitting at their usual spot: far away from everyone else. Belch Huggins was riffling through two bagged lunches that he'd stolen from some eighth-graders while Vic Criss was silently eating the school's lunch. Patrick Hockstetter had dragged his chair over to a nearby table, where April Nilsen and Steph Price were sitting with all their friends. Patrick had his arm around Steph, but she kept coyly pushing it away and feigning disinterest, knowing it would drive Patrick wild.

Funny, a couple of years ago, Patrick would have been called a creepy pervert for how handsy he was with the girls. Now, it was suddenly charming.

Belch tossed a crumpled-up napkin at Patrick's head and told him to quit flirting. In retaliation, Patrick grabbed Steph's open bag of potato chips and threw it back, making a mess all over. Steph playfully smacked him on the shoulder. "Hey, I was eating those, you dick!"

Everybody was laughing, except for Henry Bowers. He seemed miserable as ever, leaning against the wall with a scowl on his face, barely paying attention to his friends, shooting dirty looks at anybody who so much as glanced in his general direction. *You know*, Evelyn thought, *I don't think I've ever seen him eat anything at school*, and she

turned back around when he looked her way.

"Back then, Bowers was your typical bully," Paul went on casually, taking a huge bite out of his roll, "but now, he's basically a full-blown psychopath—"

"He's not a psychopath," Evelyn said without thinking. "He's just ... angry."

Her sudden interjection caught everybody off-guard, including Evelyn. She immediately wished she hadn't spoken up at all, because now all her friends were giving her weird looks.

"Angry?" Paul said, mouth agape with disbelief. "He's just angry? What the hell does that kid have to be so angry about, huh? Not enough ripped jeans in his closet?"

"Nothing," Evelyn said, scooting away from the table. "Forget I said anything."

But Paul wouldn't let it go. "No, tell me. You're the expert on Henry Bowers all of a sudden, so tell me."

"It's nothing, Paul. I just don't like that word being thrown around, okay?"

"No, it's not okay. You know, you're always making excuses for that piece of shit. No matter what he does, you're always the first one to jump in and defend him. God, you're such a fucking hypocrite, Evelyn."

Her eyes got really wide. "What? I'm not a hypocrite. I just ..." She folded her arms over her chest and drew into herself, appearing so fragile and small. "Look, I don't wanna talk about Henry Bowers anymore. Can we please just drop it?"

That made Paul stop, realizing he'd gone too far. "Yeah. Sorry. Let's just move on."

The four of them finished eating in silence.

Then Hannah-Beth scooted her chair closer to Evelyn. "Do you wanna

brainstorm new poster ideas?" she asked, getting her notebook ready. "That always cheers you up."

Paul was shaking his head. "Yeah, we need to talk about that. Um, I think we should cool it with all the posters. They're not helping nearly as much as we thought. In fact, I would say they're only making things worse." Particularly for him. Every morning, he had to spend five minutes scraping off all the defaced posters from his locker. Sometimes he even found them stuck to his front door when he got home. "I mean, maybe we should just stop this whole anti-bullying campaign altogether." He threw out the suggestion and let it hang there for a little while.

Nobody said anything, but Evelyn's eyes got small and squinty. "What are you saying, Paul? That we should abandon our entire platform? We've been planning this for over a year. We agreed on it. You said it was a great idea."

"Yeah, at the time, but nobody cares, Ev." He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling terrible. "Look, I'm sorry. I know that sucks to hear, but it's true. You're just wasting your time."

"And your paper," Lenny added, taking a huge chunk out of his new apple.

Paul nodded in agreement. "Besides, I don't think a little piece of paper is going to stop anyone—Hey, where are you going?" Evelyn had suddenly picked up her tray and stormed away from the table. Paul desperately tried to call her back. "Come on, I didn't mean anything by it. Your posters are great, really. Aww, Evelyn, don't go!" He threw up his hands in defeat. "God, she's so sensitive. Lenny, was I out of line? Honestly, was I?"

Across the cafeteria, Evelyn was angrily dumping out her lunch tray, careful not to let any silverware fall in. One of her new posters was hanging on the wall in front of her. Last week, she and Hannah-Beth had stayed late to put them up all over the school, and it didn't take very long for them to get covered with cruel insults and phallic images. Mr. Marsh had to tear them all down. Now only this one remained.

Evelyn ripped it off the wall and threw it in the trash.

"Oh, no," someone behind her said, "I liked that one, too."

Evelyn froze. She knew that voice. She heard it every third Wednesday when the student council held their monthly meetings. It was Jake Newham, student body president, captain of the varsity soccer team, and Evelyn's number one idol. She had worked tirelessly throughout his presidential campaign and felt an overwhelming sense of joy and fulfillment when he was elected. She liked to think all her banners and posters really put him over the top. She saved a few of them and put them up in her bedroom (behind her door, where her father would never look).

Now he was standing before her, seeming so much taller up close. "I've been there, you know," he said, looking down at her with a sympathetic smile, "having all your ideas mocked and criticized. I mean, I thought the whole school was gonna riot when I tried to take away the soda machines at the beginning of the year. In hindsight, not one of my better ideas." He broke off into a self-deprecating laugh, green eyes sparkling like emeralds. "But, eh, you live and you learn, right?"

"I thought it was a good idea," Evelyn said earnestly. "Then again, I am the daughter of a dentist, so ..."

"Right," he said, nodding. "Pretty sure your dad's my dentist, actually."

That made her blush. *Oh my god, he gets to work with those perfect teeth.* Suddenly her dad's job didn't seem so lame.

"Anyway," Jake went on, "my point is, most of your ideas are going to be rejected, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're bad, okay? So don't beat yourself up over it. Just get to work on your next big idea." He gave her shoulder a friendly pat. "Hang tough, Tozier. I'll see you Wednesday."

Evelyn almost squealed as she watched him go, arm still tingling where he'd touched her. Then she went back to her table with a reinvigorated feeling of self-confidence. It came out in a loud,

unexpected burst as she slammed her hands on the table and announced to her team, "We're not giving up on the anti-bullying campaign. And we're not giving up on the posters. Got it?"

Paul made a face. "Aww, why, because Jake Newham told you it was a good idea? The guy's such a dweeb."

Evelyn shot him a menacing glare. "Hey, that's our president you're talking about."

"So? He's president of the high school, Evelyn, not the damn country."

Evelyn waved him off and sat down next to Hannah-Beth. "All right, let's get to work on some new posters. I want them up by the end of the week, okay? No complaining. Our classmates elected us for a reason, so let's show them all what we're capable of."

Paul threw his head back and groaned. "Fine ... Lenny, give me a pen. If we're really gonna do this, we better do it the right way this time. I'm talking pop culture references, people. Hannah-Beth, take plenty of notes because you're sheltered and you probably know nothing. Now I'm just spitballing here, but I say we use a picture of Darth Vader doing the Force choke, okay? And in big bold letters, we say ..."

3

END BULLYING ... OR HE'LL END YOU

Evelyn read the mock-up poster that Paul had handed her in the hallway. "Wow, Paul, you really put a lot of work into this." He even doodled a cute little Darth Vader cartoon with black and red markers. *I wish he had put this much effort into our t-shirt banner.* "But I don't think we should be threatening people."

He slammed his locker shut. "What do you mean? It's not threatening. It's funny."

"It's violent and totally off-message." She handed the paper back to him. "Come up with something else."

"Like what? Something lame like your idea? 'Open Hands, Not Closed

Fists' or some dumb shit like that. We put those up, we're basically asking to get punched in the face by every student here. Do you wanna get punched in the face, Evelyn? Because I sure as hell don't. It fucking hurts."

A large group of freshmen came stampeding down the hall, caught in the excitement of another schoolday finally coming to an end. Evelyn moved out of the way before they trampled her into the floor. One of them, she overheard, was talking about Henry Bowers having to stay late to finish a math test.

"Look," Paul said, recapturing her attention, "I say we vote. Who says we go with the cool Darth Vader poster?"

As expected, Paul and Lenny raised their hands right away, but what really shocked Evelyn was seeing Hannah-Beth's hand go up a few seconds after—slowly, like she was afraid it would make her new friend mad.

Paul was beaming. "And all for Evelyn's lame poster?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay, no need to rub it in." Deep down, Evelyn knew her idea wasn't the greatest, but she chalked that up to be extremely distracted and off her A-game. "Now, I believe in democracy, so as much as I don't like it, as long as Mr. Burke approves of it, we can go with your poster, Paul."

"Yes!" Paul gave Lenny a high-five. "Now let's get out of here. Lenny, you still coming over after school? My brother finally got his copy of *Castlevania* back from that shithead Elmhirst."

"Hell yeah!"

The three of them started down the hall, talking about their after-school plans, but Evelyn stayed by the lockers. "Um, you guys go on ahead. I'm gonna stick around here for a little bit."

They all slowed to a stop and exchanged confused glances. "What, you got a meeting or something?" Paul asked.

"No, I'm just gonna, uhh, wait for Henry to get out of class and talk to him about the shirts." Evelyn shifted a little in her stance and tugged

her backpack strap securely into place.

Hannah-Beth gave her a worried look. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" she asked. "Going alone, I mean? Do you want us to go with you?"

"No, that's okay." In fact, that was the very last thing she wanted. "I can handle Henry Bowers just fine on my own. Seriously, don't worry about me. I'll just ... " She took a small step to the right. "I'll see you guys tomorrow, 'kay?"

"Yeah, I really don't think that's a good idea, Evie," Paul said, his face long with concern. "Look, I know you really want those shirts back, but they're not worth all this trouble. They're just shirts."

"They're not just shirts," Evelyn snapped, temper boiling before she could get a handle on it. They just didn't get it. "And what would you know about their worth, Paul? You didn't pay for them. *I did*. Out of my own pocket, remember? Because I had to fix your fuck-up. Because apparently you don't know how to spell *sophomore*!" She turned on her heel and tore down the hallway, leaving everyone in stunned silence.

After a while, Paul muttered, "How was I supposed to know there were two o's?" He looked at the other two. "Did you know that? Did *you* know that?"

4

Evelyn was sitting on the floor outside the freshman math class, her backpack resting beside her, a book clasped loosely in her hands. It was one of Hannah-Beth's romance novels actually. She had slipped it to her during English class, said it was one of her favorites and a must-read. Out of curiosity, Evelyn opened it up to a random page and skimmed over a passage. The prose was a little flowery for her taste, but so far there was nothing too scandalous going on ...

... until Evelyn reached a particularly racy description of a certain bulging body part; then she slammed the book shut and set it down on her lap, face burning with embarrassment, shame, and—although she would never admit it aloud—a tiny bit of lust.

But when she heard the squeaking wheels of Mr. Marsh's custodial cart, the shame took over entirely. He came around the corner, grumbling the whole time, and he saw the book right away. The look on his face was a fatherly one: stern and full of disappointment. It made Evelyn want to die a little inside.

"Girls like you shouldn't be reading those sorta books," he said, like it was a warning. Then he continued on his way, shaking his head.

"Yes, Mr. Marsh," Evelyn muttered, watching him go. She stuffed the book into the deepest, darkest depths of her backpack and vowed never to touch it again. "Thanks a lot, Hannah."

She threw her head back and kept waiting. The clock on the wall ticked and tocked, ticked and tocked.

3:15

3:20

3:25

At 3:30, the classroom door finally swung open and Henry Bowers walked out, calling Mrs. Lafferty a bitch under his breath. Then he noticed Evelyn sitting on the floor, and his expression soured even further. "What the hell are you doing here, Tozier?"

Evelyn staggered to her feet, legs immediately going numb from sitting for so long. "I, uh, wanted to talk to you."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? About what?"

Before she could get a word out, Henry walked right past her and started toward his locker. Evelyn snatched her backpack and stumbled after him, struggling to find solid footing.

His math book hit the back of his locker with a loud, reverberating *clang*. Then he carelessly tossed in his pencil and calculator and closed the door, pushing his back against it. His eyes narrowed into an intimidating glare. "You wanted to talk? So talk."

She sucked in a calming breath. "R-Right. Look, Henry, I'm sorry for

what I did this morning. I acted without thinking, and I really didn't mean to make you look stupid in front of your friends."

He folded his arms over his chest, making his lean muscles more pronounced. "You thought you made me look stupid?"

"What? No, I just—" She bit down hard on her lip, realizing she'd made a huge mistake. Talking to Henry Bowers was like walking through a minefield. One wrong move and kiss your ass goodbye. "You know what, never mind. I shouldn't have come here. Sorry to have bothered you."

She turned to leave and saw Belch Huggins and Vic Criss rounding the corner. She rolled her eyes. *God, do they always have to travel in a pack?*

Belch was smirking as they approached. "What's going on here?"

"I think she came to beg for her shirts back," Henry answered, so obviously pleased with himself.

Beside him, Vic was giving her a look that said, *What the hell are you doing here?*

Right now, Evelyn was asking herself the same thing.

She spun around, intending to go the other way, and instantly ran into Patrick Hockstetter's waiting arms. His large hands clamped around her biceps and held her there as he smiled down at her, blue eyes glowing with anticipation. "Now where do you think you're going, hmm?"

"I - I need to go catch the bus."

His smile grew. "Don't worry about that. We'll give you a ride once we're finished here." Then he pushed her back towards the lockers, putting her right in the middle of the four of them. That's when Henry made his move, pinning her up against the lockers. He was so close they could practically kiss.

"Well?" he said, his hot breath mingling with hers. "You came here to beg, right? So start begging."

Her eyes flattened into slits. "I'm not gonna beg you for anything, Henry." As if she would ever stoop so low. "Instead, I'm going to ask you very nicely for my shirts back."

"Oh, really?" He gave a dry, mocking laugh and pulled away. "Fine, I guess I could give them back, since they're so important to you and all ... Five bucks a shirt sound fair enough? That's gotta be, what, three hundred dollars?"

"Three hundred and twenty-five, to be exact," muttered Vic, unable to keep his mouth shut. "There were like sixty-five shirts there."

"Sixty-nine actually," Evelyn corrected, all too happy to throw it back in Victor Criss's face. "I sold one, and ten never made it into the box, including the one Henry ruined, ... so it's more like three hundred and forty-five dollars."

Vic cocked his head to the side. "Are you sure about that?"

Evelyn nodded. "Positive. I'm in the advanced math class, remember? What class are you in again, Victor?" She flashed him a devilish smile that shut him up right away, and she almost didn't stop there. *I should tell them all the truth right now. Watch him squirm, the coward. It's no less than what he deserves.* But Evelyn was too nice.

And Henry was quickly losing control of the situation. "God, would the two of you shut the fuck up already?" he said with a frustrated groan. "Now the price is three-fifty, Tozier. Pay me three hundred and fifty dollars, and I'll give you your shirts back. Deal?"

Her jaw dropped. "Come on, you've gotta be kidding me. Henry, you know I don't have that kinda money."

Henry's lips curled into a knowing smirk. "Well, we can always work out something else, if you want." Then he reached out and wrapped his fingers around a lock of her brown hair, skin brushing gently against her cheek.

His touch made Evelyn's whole body go rigid. Her backpack slipped off her shoulder and fell to the floor, but Evelyn never heard it land. Somewhere in the far corners of her mind, someone was whispering,

Nobody else has to know.

The words echoed all around her, sucking her deep into the memory.
Nobody else has to know.

Without realizing it, Evelyn had pushed her hand out in front of her, shoving Henry back with great force. He rocked back on his heels, fighting to keep his balance, and then he came back at her, exploding with rage. "Don't you fucking touch me!"

Evelyn gasped and lurched away.

Before he could lay a hand on her, Belch Huggins jumped between them, shouting, "Henry, no!" and with all his strength, he pushed Henry back against the opposite row of lockers and held him there with his bodyweight as the teen thrashed about like a wild animal. "Have you lost your fucking mind? We're in school, man! You can't do that kinda shit in the hallway! Dude, chill! *Chill!*" He looked around, praying none of the faculty had heard the commotion.

Then he started to question why Patrick Hockstetter found this all so amusing.

The lanky teen had stepped away from the rest of them, watching the entire scene unfold with wide-eyed delight. His tongue flicked across his lips, making them wet and shiny. Then he looked at Evelyn, who stood clutching her heaving chest.

Vic Criss was standing in front of her, shielding her from the attack that never came. Evelyn saw him, and her heart sank with guilt.

"Vic," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

He peeked over his shoulder, brown eyes meeting hers in a cold stare. "Just get out of here, Evelyn."

She grabbed her backpack and ran down the hallway.

5

As soon as Evelyn walked out of the building, a hand came out of nowhere and grabbed her arm, slamming her against the brick wall.

"What the hell was that, Evelyn?" Victor Criss hissed, angrier than she had ever seen him. "Huh? Are you trying to make my life hell? Does it give you some kind of sick pleasure to torture me like this? Because now you've really put me in a shitty spot."

They had seen him. Without a doubt, they had seen how fast he stepped in front of her like that. And now they were gonna start to ask questions.

Evelyn's head was still spinning from the whole thing. "What? N-No, I wasn't, I swear. I was just trying to get my shirts back."

"Jesus, Evelyn!" He backed away from her and clutched his head, raking his fingers through his blond hair as he tried to think of a way out. "I told you I was gonna get them back for you, didn't I? I was gonna handle it. But you couldn't wait, could you? You just had to push and push and *push* like you always do. And now, well, you're never getting them back. I hope you realize that. Henry's never gonna give them back to you now."

"I don't care," she uttered. "I had to stand up for myself. You certainly weren't gonna do anything."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he asked, glaring at her.

She glared back. "I dunno, Vic. I think maybe all that bleach has gone to your head a little bit. Because the Vic I know would never choose Henry Bowers over his real friends. But that guy's been gone for a long time, hasn't he? Now all I see is a spineless coward who only cares about saving his own ass."

"Is that right?" His laughter was cruel, but Evelyn could hear the hurt behind it. "I'm a coward, huh? Well if I'm a coward, then you're a fucking hypocrite, Evelyn." He punched the wall beside her and kept his hand there, bringing his face really close. Evelyn fought to avoid his accusing stare. He chased her with his eyes. "Yeah, you think I don't know? I live just down the street, Evelyn. I see who goes in and out of your house."

Suddenly, the door to the west entrance opened, and Mrs. Fletcher walked out of the school with her brown satchel bouncing on her hip.

Her loafers hit the bottom step when she noticed the two teenagers standing in the shadow of the building. Their positioning made her suspicious. "Everything okay, Evelyn?"

At that, Vic retreated from her, shoving his aching hand in his back pocket.

"Everything's fine," Evelyn said, forcing a smile. "Have a good day, Mrs. Fletcher."

"You too." She gave Victor Criss a curt nod and continued on her way.

When the teacher was out of sight, Evelyn relaxed and stepped away from the building, moving closer to him. "Look, Vic, it's not what you think."

"Yeah?" He spun around. "So what is it then?"

Her mouth opened and closed, brown eyes glistening. "I ... I can't tell you. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Of course." Vic hung his head and muttered something under his breath. "I guess I'm not the only one choosing Henry Bowers over my friends, then."

Evelyn dropped her head and went quiet.

The blaring honk of the Trans Am's horn sounded more like a siren as the car pulled up to the curb, Belch's muscled arm hanging out the driver's side window. "Hey, Vic, you coming or not?"

Vic looked at the car, then back at Evelyn.

"Vic! Come on!"

Vic cursed through gritted teeth. As much as he didn't want to go, he knew staying would only make things worse, so he left Evelyn without another word and strode off toward the car.

Henry pushed open the passenger door and climbed out. "What the hell was that about?"

"Nothing," Vic replied in a cool, detached voice. He glanced back toward the school and saw Evelyn sink to her knees in the grass, crying. *She was right. You really are a coward.* But it was too late to go back now. "She just asked me for her shirts back, that's all. Girl's pretty desperate."

And I'm a fucking asshole.

5. Chapter 5

1

There were few things in life that Belch Huggins cherished more than his 1981 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. His lovely mother, Charlene, was one of them (and no amount of teasing from the other boys was ever going to make him think any different); the other was the mixtape Christie Gibson had given him last summer. Sure, the music was mostly shit: a mixture of teen-pop dance hits and new wave garbage that used way too much synth, but that's what had been playing while they were fooling around in the backseat of his car, so he couldn't bring himself to toss it. Instead, he locked it away in his glovebox—the same glovebox Henry Bowers was digging through right now.

The teen lazily fingered his way down the stack, finding mostly old receipts and other useless junk. Nothing particularly interesting. "You got a lotta shit in here, you know that?" His words were muffled by the lit cigarette jutting out from between his lips. He took it out and blew the smoke out the window with a single puff.

Belch kept one eye on the road. "Yeah, I gotta clean it out one of these days."

"No shit." Henry flipped it closed and leaned back in his seat, elbow hanging out the window. He flicked grey ashes onto the road. "Where are we even going?"

"I dunno, man. I'm just driving." He turned onto Macklin Street, going nice and slow as he passed the police station.

A loud groan came from the backseat. "We've been *just driving* for an hour," said Patrick Hockstetter, his long legs bent at an uncomfortable angle. The cardboard box was wedged between him and Victor Criss, taking up what little space there was back there. "Why do we still have this anyway?" At this point, Patrick was ready to chuck it out the window and watch it get pulverized by the cars behind them. He pounded on the box a few times with his fist. "Let's just dump it already."

Henry blew out more smoke and ran his hand through his dirty blond hair. "Shut up, Patrick."

Patrick rolled his eyes. "Fine, then I'm putting on some music." He pushed himself between the two front seats and started fumbling with the frequency knob. "Because if I have to listen to metal mouth grinding his teeth for one more second, I'm gonna blow my fuckin' brains out."

Vic shot him a venomous glare. "Fuck you, man."

"Oh, so he can talk." Patrick stopped between stations, filling the car with the grating sound of static and snatches of voices, (*You're listening to WBFE ...*) and he turned around, smirking. "So, Vic, I'm dying to know what you and Tozier were talking about for so long outside school today. Must've been quite the conversation."

Henry took an extra-long drag from his cigarette, closing his eyes as he inhaled the smoke.

(... mostly cloudy tonight, with a low of fif-fif—ee—oo)

"I told you already," Vic said, getting more defensive than he ought to, but all the noise was making it hard for him to think straight. Patrick seemed to sense that. Probably even planned for it, the bastard. "Girl just wanted her shirts back. Guess she thought I would help her."

(and then I said to the kuh-kuh-kuh-klutz ... if you wanna be a juh-juh-ackassssssssss)

Patrick propped up his elbow on Henry's seat, getting more comfortable than Henry liked judging from the look on his face. Patrick didn't care. "Yeah, but why would she think that, Vic? Why would she think *you* would help her?"

All of a sudden, a loud, high-pitched screech took over the speakers, making everyone except Patrick cringe and cover their ears. The car swerved into the left lane, right into oncoming traffic. Belch pulled hard on the steering wheel just before they collided with a green four-door; then he slammed his fist on the wheel, his face red-hot and

sweaty. "Goddammit, Patrick!"

The radio went dead after that (Henry had flipped the switch), but their ears kept ringing for a while as they adjusted to the silence. Belch made another right and then took the very next left onto Kansas Street.

Patrick looked annoyed, like a child who got his toy taken away. "I was listening to that."

When he tried to turn it back on, Henry gave his hand a good swat. "Just sit the fuck down, Patrick," he said, seething. "I'm already getting tired of your shit."

But Patrick didn't back down. In fact, he rose up a little, making himself sit even taller. "God, that girl's really got you worked up, huh, Bowers? Evelyn Tozier, who'da thought?" He gave Henry's arm a light smack. "Hey, why don't you do us all a favor and nail the little bitch already? Or are you too much of a pussy?"

Henry responded by putting out his cigarette on Patrick's forearm, enjoying the quiet sizzle that his skin made as it burned. Patrick seemed to enjoy it, too. The boy didn't even flinch. In fact, he was smiling.

"You know what, it doesn't even hurt," Patrick said in an almost taunting way, keeping his arm perfectly still. In turn, Henry pushed the cigarette deeper into his skin and gave it a little twist. The ashes pooled around the butt and crumbled away, falling onto the seat and onto the floor.

Belch glanced in their direction. "What the fuck are you two doing?" From where he was sitting, it looked like some sadistic game of chicken, and he wasn't sure who was winning. "Hey, you assholes better not get any of that shit in my car. I just vacuumed."

At that, Henry removed the cigarette and tossed it out the window before drawing a new one from his pack. Patrick's lips stretched into a victorious smirk as he sank back into his seat. A burning, bright red ring had already started to form around the tiny pink crater on his arm, getting darker by the second. Patrick didn't mind.

He threw his head back and stared up at the roof, getting lost in the blackness of it. "So, where are we going?"

2

Belch couldn't remember who had suggested they go to the dump, but he figured it was probably Patrick Hockstetter. Patrick liked to go there alone sometimes, to scour through all the muck and the trash in hopes of finding that rare diamond in the rough. Once, he found an old lazy boy recliner that still worked if you gave the lever a good enough yank. He hauled it home in the back of Martin Davers's red pickup, then doused it with a full can aerosol spray to cover up the smell. Now it was his favorite chair.

Patrick got out first, before the car had even come to a complete stop. He pulled his long, skinny torso out through the driver's side window, dragged his legs over the frame one after another, and then jumped down. "Bout fuckin' time." His legs ached as he stretched them out for the first time, but it was a good ache. Their old strength was returning quickly. To prove it, he kicked an old soup can and sent it flying halfway across the yard, where it bounced off the broken door of an old puke-green refrigerator and rolled underneath a junked Toyota Corolla sitting on bare wheel-rims.

Patrick threw his hands up like he'd just scored a goal, then spun around. "You fuckers getting out, or what?"

They didn't move, and he didn't wait for them. Patrick sucked in a lungful of the sour, sludgy air and walked off by himself, disappearing behind one of the garbage piles.

The others were glad to see him go.

Henry Bowers made himself comfortable on the car's hood, pulling out a third cigarette with his teeth. It took him a couple of tries to create a flame with his lighter. For some reason, he just couldn't get the motion right, and his growing frustration only made it worse. "Useless piece of shit." Once he finally had it, he whipped the lighter at the ground and leaned all the way back against the windshield, drawing his legs in.

Belch Huggins and Victor Criss were watching him from inside the car, neither of them saying a word. Vic draped his arm over the cardboard box, holding it close, protecting it while he could. Then a thought flashed through his mind. He wondered if anyone would notice if he took the box and walked off with it. How far would he make it before Henry caught him?

Not far, he decided. Vic wasn't fast enough to outrun him.

But if he had Belch's car, he could do it. Sure he could.

Vic looked up at the rearview mirror and saw the older boy's reflection. Reggie (that was his real name, though hardly anybody ever called him by it) seemed troubled about something, maybe the same "something" that was bothering Vic right now. His large hands were on the steering wheel, gripping it at ten and two like you were supposed to, and the keys were still in the ignition, dangling from a silver chain with a red leather strap and two black-and-white dice.

Maybe, Vic thought as he watched the dice clack together, Reggie wanted to drive away too. If Vic asked him, maybe he'd gun it and take off. Make Henry Bowers slide off the hood and chase after them, hollering like a maniac. The thought almost made Vic burst out laughing.

Almost.

Truthfully, Vic was too scared—scared of not knowing what was about to happen, but *feeling* deep in his gut that something terrible was going to happen if he didn't get out of there quick.

And that "something terrible" was starting right now.

"Hey," Henry said, leaning in through the driver's side window. The look in his eye made Vic uneasy. "Get out, both of you, and bring that stupid box."

3

Eddie Kaspbrak nearly screamed when the soup can came rolling out from underneath the Toyota Corolla, stopping just inches away from his foot. He jumped back, shoes sinking into the mud, and opened his

mouth only to have the sound smothered by Richie Tozier's sweaty hand.

Ugh, his hand smells like cheese, Eddie thought first, wondering when the boy had last washed his hands. Then he saw all the dirt on the white bottoms of his black Nikes, and he knew he was sure to get a mouthful from his mother when he got home.

Where'd all that dirt come from, Eddie? Goodness gracious, I swear I've never seen so much mud in my life! Where'd you go? Somewhere you're not supposed to, I'll bet. Oh, you know how I hate mud in the house. Take those shoes off before you track it all over the place. I just scrubbed those floors, too. Now I'm gonna have to scrub them all over again. Get on my hands and knees with a bucket and sponge. And you know how badly that hurts my knees, Eddie.

I know, Mom, Eddie would say, and he would slip off his shoes and promise to be more careful.

Somewhere in the distance, Patrick Hockstetter was shouting, "You fuckers getting out, or what?"

Richie yanked Eddie back, pulling them both behind the junked car. Eddie wrestled himself free of Richie's grasp so he could catch a proper breath. His inhaler would help, but he was afraid the zipper might make too much noise.

Shoes crunched in the gravel as footsteps drew closer—closer and closer. They could hear Patrick Hockstetter humming to himself, sometimes stopping to mumble things that didn't make sense. It sounded like he was alone, but they couldn't be sure, and both of them were too scared to stand up and sneak a peek.

Please, no, thought Eddie, knees trembling. *Don't come over here!*

The footsteps got quieter and quieter, eventually vanishing entirely. A few minutes later, Richie Tozier mustered the courage to poke his head out and look. "He's gone."

That didn't make Eddie feel better. "He'll come back."

"Then we better be fast."

Eddie shook his head. "No. No, I don't like this. We should go. We shouldn't be here." Not in a junkyard of all places, surrounded by dirt and shit and disease, squatting behind a rusty old car while Patrick Hockstetter was waiting to jump out and grab him, lock him in that fridge.

Eddie's face went white when he thought about the fridge.

It's just some bullshit story, he told himself. Hockstetter's an asshole, but even he's not that crazy.

Are you sure about that, Eds? Toby Bickford sure thought the fridge was real enough. He'd seen it with his own eyes, or at least he claimed he had, but Toby Bickford liked to talk out of his ass sometimes. Richie Tozier had warned Eddie about him back in the sixth grade. "You really gotta have shit for brains if you believe any of the crap Bullshit Bickford says." Eddie had laughed when he heard that, but he wasn't laughing now.

Because Patrick Hockstetter was that crazy, and it was a different kind of crazy than Henry Bowers—a worse kind, Eddie believed. Bowers would shove your face in dog shit for no reason, or smash your nose, or break your arm, and when he screamed at you, his face got all red and looked about to explode off his neck like a balloon pumped with too much helium.

With Patrick, it was different. He wasn't the type to beat you up for looking at him funny, or running into him in the hallway, or saying something smart like Richie Tozier liked to do. Nothing ever seemed to make him angry. He was smiling, always smiling, but there was something deeply unsettling about that smile. Eddie didn't know how to describe it, but he knew it wasn't right.

He knew it was dangerous.

"Where's Bowers?" Eddie asked, keeping an eye out for Patrick just in case.

"On the car, smoking. The others are there, too." Richie pushed up his glasses. "The shirts are in there, I bet."

Eddie had almost forgotten about his sister's shirts. That's what had brought them there. Richie had forced Eddie to come along after Bill Denbrough and Stan Uris said no. Eddie didn't have a choice—Richie said so. Somebody had to go with him on his suicide mission, and Eddie couldn't think up a good excuse fast enough. So they hopped on their bikes and chased the Trans Am around town until it finally stopped at the junkyard (because, of course, they just *had* to pick the junkyard). Eddie and Richie hid behind the old Toyota and stashed their bikes in some nearby bushes in case they needed to make a quick getaway.

But right now those bushes seemed miles away. What if they couldn't reach them in time? What if somebody came and nabbed them, and they were stranded there? *Then we'd be done for.* And Patrick Hockstetter would show him the fridge that wasn't supposed to exist.

"Okay," Eddie said, taking a big gulp, "what's the plan?"

For the first time since Eddie had known him, Richie had nothing to say, and that made Eddie even more scared.

"You don't have a plan, huh?"

The corner of Richie's lips curled up bashfully. Eddie should have known better. Richie Tozier wasn't exactly the plan-making type. No, he was more of a make-fun-of-the-plan type. Bill Denbrough was the plan-maker. Big Bill, that was who they needed now, with his big, crazy ideas that somehow always worked out. But Bill wasn't there. He had to help his father with a woodworking project after school. *I made a pruh-pruh-promise.*

"Fuck," Eddie whispered. Now it really was hopeless. Stan would agree with him if he were there, but he wasn't there either. Nobody was there. They were alone. "We should wait. We should wait for Bill and Stan and try again tomorrow."

"There won't be a tomorrow, dipshit!" Richie whispered hotly. "Do you see where they are? They're at the fuckin' dump!" And now Henry Bowers was off the hood and walking around to the driver's side. He must have said something to Belch Huggins and Victor Criss because the two of them got out of the car, too. Richie saw the

cardboard box in Vic's hands. "It's now or never."

4

"So, what are we gonna do with it?"

Patrick Hockstetter squatted down beside the box. The Zippo lighter was in his right hand, glinting in the sunlight. Patrick was playing with it: spinning the wheel with his thumb, making a flame, then slapping the lid closed with a quiet *clunk*. "I can think of a couple things." The lighter clinked open, and he flicked the wheel again.

The others were standing a few feet away. Henry was leaning against Belch's car.

"We're not setting them on fire," Vic said. "You trying to get expelled?"

Patrick shrugged. His lighter went *clunk*. "Not like you guys are offering up any ideas. How 'bout it, Bowers? We can have a bonfire. Throw the ashes on her porch."

"Shut up, Patrick," said Henry. "I'm thinking."

Patrick went quiet, sulking a little.

Gravel crunched in the distance.

A whisper.

Then a slap.

"We should just give them back," Belch said quietly. He took off his black-and-yellow cap and wiped away some of the sweat from his hairline before putting it back on. It was getting late; the sun was starting to set behind the trees. His mother would be home from work soon. "Those shirts are basically school property, aren't they?"

"Yeah," said Vic, "and a goody-two-shoes like Tozier won't hesitate to report us. I dunno about you assholes, but I'm definitely not getting detention over a couple dumb shirts."

Belch was shaking his head. The car keys jingled in his hand. He just wanted to go home and relax, eat some of that leftover pot roast that was sitting in the fridge and find out how his mom's day went.

"She's not gonna rat," Patrick said. "If she was, she would've done it already."

Patrick was right, but Henry didn't need to know that.

"Are you fucking stupid, Patrick?" said Vic. "The whole school knows we took those shirts. If she doesn't talk, one of her student council buddies surely will. And if it hasn't reached Hellyer by now, it will tomorrow. He's already got it in for us—for Henry, especially. Do you really wanna get suspended over this, Henry?" *I'm sure your old man would love that.* Vic didn't need to say that part. Henry was already thinking it. Vic saw him flinch.

But Henry was quick to hide it. "I said, shut the fuck up and let me think!" He started rubbing the back of his neck, clearly agitated. "I'll decide what we do with the shirts, okay?"

Crunch. Crunch.

"They'll hear us."

"Shut up!"

Patrick made a disgusted sound. "You're not gonna do shit, Bowers. We all know that. You're gonna give the shirts back to her, show her you're not such a bad guy after all. Because maybe then she'll finally drop her panties for you." He got to his feet, taking one of the shirts with him. "Here, why don't you keep one, Henry? The blue really matches your eyes."

The shirt smacked Henry on the nose before he caught it. Patrick was laughing.

"You want one too, Vic? I saw you jump in front of her back in the hallway. Don't think I've ever seen you move so fast."

The shirt came flying at Vic. He ripped it out of the air and pulled it down to his side.

"Fuck! It's too heavy!"

"Shut up and help me!"

Patrick went back for another, then stopped. "What the fuck?"

The box was gone, now clutched in the hands of Eddie Kaspbrak and Richie Tozier. The boys took four steps and froze when they felt eyes on them. Henry Bowers stepped away from the car, looking more confused than angry. And Patrick Hockstetter was smiling. That's when Eddie knew they were done for.

"Oh, shit!" He gasped and released his side. The box fell to the ground, blue shirts spilling everywhere. Eddie turned and ran, kicking up dirt and flecks of garbage.

Richie took off, too, but not before grabbing a fistful of shirts (because some shirts were better than no shirts, and he didn't want his plan to be a total failure). He passed the junked Toyota Corolla and picked up the pace. His feet skidded through the rocks as he changed directions, making a break for the bushes where they'd hid their bikes.

Wait, which bushes were they again? They all looked the same.

Eddie was heading a different way.

Fuck!

Richie decided to keep running. The shirts were wedged in his armpit—six, maybe eight of them. He'd lost a few somewhere along the way, but he couldn't go back for them now. Bowers was right on his tail. Richie could hear him screaming, "Get back here, you fuckers!"

"Eat shit, Bowers!" Richie yelled back once. He couldn't help it.

He should have been watching where he was going. If he had been more focused on that, he might have seen the broken bedspring that was lying on the ground. Instead, the trashmouth was too busy talking shit, so when his foot inevitably got ensnared by one of the coiled metal springs, well, he could only blame himself.

The shirts flew out and scattered away. The ground came rushing fast, smacking Richie Tozier hard on the chin. A giant cloud of dust and dirt settled around him, covering his hair and clothes. Richie tried to get up. Pain shot through his whole body as blood leaked out of a dozen cuts and scrapes on his elbows and knees. His right wrist was starting to swell a little. He had stuck it out in an attempt to brace his fall. Another dumb idea.

They were behind him now. Richie could see their shadows in the setting sun. Eddie was probably long gone already, peddling home and muttering under his breath about how he knew this was all a bad idea from the start.

Yeah, it was a bad idea—hell, it was a terrible idea, but Richie had to do something. If he didn't, then his big sister would never know how truly sorry he was, that he hadn't meant what he said in the kitchen that morning—he was just tired and annoyed and spoke without thinking. *Because you always speak without thinking.*

Henry Bowers rolled him onto his back with his foot. Richie tried to smirk, but the muscles in his face hurt too much. He looked around for his sister's shirts, reaching with his injured hand. He found one close by and tightened his fist around it.

Bowers was staring down at him, his eyes an angry blue. "Oh, you're gonna get it now, you little four-eyed freak."

Richie Tozier used the last of his strength to give Henry Bowers the finger.